

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE DIFFICULT DOCTRINE OF REPROBATION (Part I)

We should not be all that surprised to discover that the doctrine of divine reprobation is rarely mentioned today in the vast majority of Evangelical churches. It is, quite frankly, not “user-friendly” or “seeker-sensitive.” Reprobation in classic Reformed theology is an aspect of the divine decrees regarding predestination. This in turn brings in the doctrine of election, which likewise is controversial because this brings up the whole question of the saved/unsaved. Why are some saved and others not? Confessional Reformed theology teaches that according to the eternal decree of God, He determined to elect out of the mass of fallen humanity a number to everlasting life in Christ and to leave the rest in their sin and corrupt condition and to sentence them to eternal punishment.

Here is how the **Canons of Dort** state it in Chapter 1, Article 15: “What peculiarly tends to illustrate and recommend to us the eternal and unmerited grace of election, is the express testimony of sacred Scripture, that not all, but some only are elected, while others are passed by in the eternal election of God; whom God, out of his sovereign, most just, irreprehensible and unchangeable good pleasure, hath decreed to leave in the common misery into which they have willfully plunged themselves, and not to bestow upon them saving faith and the grace of conversion; but leaving them in his just judgment to follow their own ways, at last for the declaration of his justice, to condemn and punish them forever, not only on account of their unbelief, but also for all their other sins. And this is the decree of reprobation which by no means makes God the author of sin (the very thought of which is blasphemy), but declares him to be an awful, irreprehensible, and righteous judge and avenger thereof.”

The Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter III, Articles 3 and 7) reads;

- iii. By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life; and others foreordained to everlasting death.
- vii. The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of His own will, whereby He extendeth or withholdeth mercy, as He pleaseth, for the glory of His sovereign power over His creatures, to pass by; and to ordain them to dishonour and wrath for their sin, to the praise of His glorious justice.

The Belgic Confession (1561) reads: We believe that all the posterity of Adam, being thus fallen into perdition and ruin by the sin of our first parents, God then did manifest himself such as he is; that is to say, **MERCIFUL AND JUST: MERCIFUL**, since he delivers and preserves from this perdition all whom he, in his eternal and unchangeable council, of mere goodness hath elected in Christ Jesus our Lord, without respect to their works: **JUST**, in leaving others in the fall and perdition wherein they have involved themselves. (Art. XVI)

The Second Helvetic Confession (1566) states: Finally, as often as God in Scripture is said or seems to do something evil, it is not thereby said that man does not do evil, but that God permits it and does

not prevent it, according to his just judgment, who could prevent it if he wished, or because he turns man's evil into good...St. Augustine writes in his Enchiridion: "What happens contrary to his will occurs, in a wonderful and ineffable way, not apart from his will. For it would not happen if he did not allow it. And yet he does not allow it unwillingly but willingly." (Art. VIII)

There are a large number of Biblical texts that are appealed to by these confessions to support this doctrine. Here are just a few:

Proverbs 16:4 The Lord has made everything for its own purpose, even the wicked for the day of evil.

John 12:39-40 For this reason they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, "He has blinded their eyes and He hardened their heart, so that they would not see with their eyes and perceive with their heart, and be converted and I heal them."

1 Peter 2:7-8 This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve, "The stone which the builders rejected, This became the very corner stone," and, "A stone of stumbling and a rock of offense;" for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed.

Jude 4 For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Romans 9:13-23 Just as it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." What shall we say then? There is not injustice with God, is there? May it never be! For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth." So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use? What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory.

I. DOUBLE PREDESTINATION

Any discussion of the doctrine of election *always* raises the doctrine of reprobation or double predestination.

A. What this is NOT

R. C. Sproul has addressed this and writes, "The distortion of double predestination looks like this: There is a symmetry that exists between election and reprobation. God WORKS in the same way and same manner with respect to the elect and to the reprobate. That is to say, from all eternity God decreed some to election and by divine initiative works faith in their hearts and brings them actively to salvation. By the same token, from all eternity God decrees some to sin and damnation (*destinare ad peccatum*) and actively intervenes to work sin in their lives, bringing them to damnation by divine initiative. In the case of the elect, regeneration is the monergistic work of God. In the case of the reprobate, sin and degeneration are the monergistic work of God. Stated another way, we can establish a parallelism of foreordination and predestination by means of a positive symmetry. We can call this a positive-positive view of predestination. This is, God positively and actively intervenes in the lives of the elect to bring them to salvation. In the same way God positively and actively intervenes in the life of the reprobate to bring him to sin. This distortion of positive-positive predestination clearly makes God the author of sin who punishes a person for doing what God monergistically and irresistibly coerces man to do. Such a view is

indeed a monstrous assault on the integrity of God. This is not the Reformed view of predestination, but a gross and inexcusable caricature of the doctrine. Such a view may be identified with what is often loosely described as hyper-Calvinism and involves a radical form of supralapsarianism. Such a view of predestination has been virtually universally and monolithically rejected by Reformed thinkers.”

B. What this IS

“In sharp contrast to the caricature of double predestination seen in the positive-positive schema is the classic position of Reformed theology on predestination. In this view predestination is double in that it involves both election and reprobation but is not symmetrical with respect to the mode of divine activity. A strict parallelism of operation is denied. Rather we view predestination in terms of a positive-negative relationship.

In the Reformed view God from all eternity decrees some to election and positively intervenes in their lives to work regeneration and faith by a monergistic work of grace. To the non-elect God withholds this monergistic work of grace, passing them by and leaving them to themselves. He does not monergistically work sin or unbelief in their lives. Even in the case of the ‘hardening’ of the sinners already recalcitrant hearts, God does not, as Luther stated, ‘work evil in us (for hardening is working evil) by creating fresh evil in us.’ Luther continued:

‘When men hear us say that God works both good and evil in us, and that we are subject to God’s working by mere passive necessity, they seem to imagine a man who is in himself good, and not evil, having an evil work wrought in him by God; for they do not sufficiently bear in mind how incessantly active God is in all His creatures, allowing none of them to keep holiday. He who would understand these matters, however, should think thus: God works evil in us (that is, by means of us) not through God’s own fault, but by reason of our own defect. We being evil by nature, and God being good, when He impels us to act by His own acting upon us according to the nature of His omnipotence, good though He is in Himself, He cannot but do evil by our evil instrumentality; although, according to His wisdom, He makes good use of this evil for His own glory and for our salvation.’

Thus, the mode of operation in the lives of the elect is not parallel with that operation in the lives of the reprobate. God works regeneration monergistically but never sin. Sin falls within the category of providential concurrence.

Another significant difference between the activity of God with respect to the elect and the reprobate concerns God’s justice. The decree and fulfillment of election provide mercy for the elect while the efficacy of reprobation provides justice for the reprobate. God shows mercy sovereignly and unconditionally to some, and gives justice to those passed over in election. That is to say, God grants the mercy of election to some and justice to others. No one is the victim of injustice. To fail to receive mercy is not to be treated unjustly. God is under no obligation to grant mercy to all—in fact He is under no obligation to grant mercy to any. He says, “I will have mercy upon whom I will have mercy” (Rom. 9). The divine prerogative to grant mercy voluntarily cannot be faulted. If God is required by some cosmic law apart from Himself to be merciful to all men, then we would have to conclude that justice demands mercy. If that is so, then mercy is no longer voluntary, but required. If mercy is required, it is no longer mercy, but justice. What God does not do is sin by visiting injustice upon the reprobate. Only by considering election and reprobation as being asymmetrical in terms of a positive-negative schema can God be exonerated from injustice.”¹

II REPROBATION

“Reprobation,” wrote Shedd, “is the antithesis to election and necessarily follows from it. If God does not elect a person, he rejects him. If God decides not to convert a sinner into a saint, he decides to let him remain a sinner. If God decides not to work in a man to will and to do

according to God's will, he decides to leave the man to will and to do according to his own will. If God purposes not to influence a particular human will to good, he purposes to allow that will to have its own way. When God effectually operates upon the human will, it is election. When God does not effectually operate upon the human will, it is reprobation. And he must do either the one or the other. The logical and necessary connection between election and reprobation is seen also by considering the two divine attributes concerned in each. Election is the expression of divine mercy, reprobation of divine justice. God must manifest one or the other of these two attributes toward a transgressor. St. Paul teaches this in Rom. 11:22: 'Behold the goodness and severity of God (divine compassion and divine justice) on them which fell severity; but toward you goodness.' Consequently, whoever holds the doctrine of election must hold the antithetic doctrine of reprobation."²

Reformed Theology usually speaks of reprobation as consisting of *preterition* and *condemnation*.

A. Preterition: From the Latin – *praeter* [by] and *ire* [to go]. Together they mean *to pass by*.

This is God's sovereign act of passing by the non-elect and leaving them in their sinful condition.

B. Condemnation: Those who are passed by are condemned for their sins. (Rom. 2:13; Rev. 20:13).

- It should be pointed out that preterition is like election in that it too is *unconditional*. God's passing by some was not conditioned upon their unbelief. This is God's judicial act by which the non-elect are ordained to continue under the sentence of the broken law and are culpable for their own sin.
- Condemnation, however, is *conditional*. God condemns the sinner based upon his sin.
- The exercise of Divine justice is an absolute *necessity* – while the exercise of God's mercy is *optional* (Rom. 9:18).

CONCLUSION: Wisely did Herman Bavinck, one of the most distinguished Reformed theologians, write that if election “were based on justice and merit, all would be lost. But now that election operates according to grace, there is hope even for the most wretched. If work and reward were the standard of admission into the kingdom of heaven, its gates would be opened for no one. Or if Pelagius's doctrine were the standard, and the virtuous were chosen because of their virtue, and Pharisees because of their righteousness, wretched publicans would be shut out. Pelagianism has no pity. But to believe in and to confess election is to recognize even the most unworthy and degraded human being as a creature of God and an object of his eternal love. The purpose of election is not—as it is so often proclaimed—to turn off the many but to invite all to participate in the riches of God's grace in Christ. No one has a *right* to believe that he or she is a reprobate, for everyone is sincerely and urgently called to believe in Christ with a view to salvation. No one *can* actually believe it, for one's own life and all that makes it enjoyable is proof that God takes no delight in his death. No one *really* believes it, for that would be hell on earth. But election is a source of comfort and strength, of submissiveness and humility, of confidence and resolution. The salvation of human beings is firmly established in the gracious and omnipotent good pleasure of God.”³

ENDNOTES

¹ R. C. Sproul, “Double Predestination” available at <http://ccc138.org/etc/printer-friendly.asp?ID=279>

² W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Third edition P & R, 2008) p. 333.

³ H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics II* (Baker, 2004) p. 402.